

# ALLY IN THE EAST:



## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Sino-Tanzanian Strategic Relations and Its Implications for U.S. Africa Policy

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On the morning of Thursday, Oct. 14, 1999, former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere died of leukemia at the age of 77 at St. Thomas Hospital in London. Mwalimu, as he was known, was the founding father of Tanzania and an elder statesman from the 1960s African independence movements.<sup>1</sup> In addition to his contributions to his home country and on the African continent as a whole, Nyerere visited the People's Republic of China "more than 10 times in his life."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he was integral in facilitating and supporting China's strategic presence in East Africa and on the African continent. It is no wonder that upon Nyerere's death, China's official state news agency, *Xinhua*, reported that the Chinese *people* had "lost an old friend."<sup>3</sup>

Much has changed in the world since Nyerere's death in 1999. But the close friendship between China and Tanzania has not; nor has China's strategic presence in Tanzania. In the 21st century, Tanzania's prominent position in Greater East Africa, as well as its location astride the Western Indian Ocean region, gives it added geopolitical importance. While Western nations, the United Kingdom and the United States, in particular, cultivated close ties with neighboring Kenya in the last century, China devoted substantial time, energy, patience and resources in creating an ally of its own in the region.<sup>4</sup> What has been the nature of Sino-Tanzanian strategic relations in the 21st century, and why? To what extent has China furthered its already close relationship with Tanzania through political-military interactions? By addressing questions such as these, the United States will be better positioned to craft a prudent and effective Africa policy of its own in the 21st century.

### Visits and Influence

In the 21st century, China and Tanzania have exchanged senior-level military delegation visits, on average, every year. In addition, Chinese naval vessels have made port-of-call visits to Dar es Salaam on repeated occasions. The visits themselves were symbolic representations of the bilateral military relations between the two countries. Furthermore, in the context of the dynamic changes in the post-Cold War international political environment, the visits demonstrated the continued political importance each placed in the other.

Exchange visits this century began in late July 2000 with a momentous (though underreported in the West) port visit by two vessels of the People's Liberation Army Navy, the guided missile destroyer *Shenzhen* (DDG 167) and the large supply ship *Nancang* (AOG 953). The Chinese delegation was led by Rear Admiral Huang Jiang, chief of staff of the PLAN South Sea Fleet. Welcoming Jiang was General Robert Mboma, chief of the Tanzanian People's Defense Forces. Notably, Mboma said, "Tanzania highly appreciates the assistance provided by China in building the navy which has been playing a very important role in defense of the 1,224-kilometer coast and exclusive economic zone."<sup>5</sup> Thus, not only were Chinese naval personnel gaining experience along the East African coastline, Tanzania gained much needed support for its own national security needs. In many ways, the July 2000 PLAN port visit signified the mutually beneficial aspects of the bilateral military relationship that has been nurtured over many decades.

Well before China's presence in Africa gained widespread media, academic and government coverage, China was engaged in adept strategic relationship-building around the continent. The new century resumed China's interactions with key African nations such as Tanzania. To illustrate, the following is a list of high-level Sino-Tanzanian military exchange visits that occurred between 2000 and 2010:<sup>6</sup>

- In November 2001, a senior PLA delegation led by General Fu Quanyou (member of the Central Military Commission and chief of the general staff, PLA) visited Tanzania and met with President Benjamin Mkapa
- In August 2002, a senior TPDF delegation led by General George Waitara (chief of the TPDF) visited China and met with Minister of Defense Chi Haotian
- In September 2003, Tanzanian Minister of Defense Philemon Sarungi visited China and met with Vice Premier Huang Ju (member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, Communist Party of China)
- In May 2004, a senior TPDF delegation led by Lieutenant General Iddi Gahhu (chief of staff, TPDF) visited China and met General Ge Zhenfeng (deputy chief of the general staff, PLA)
- In April 2005, a senior Chinese delegation led by Minister of Defense Cao Gangchuan (state councilor and vice chairman of the CMC) visited Tanzania and met with President Mkapa
- In September 2005, a senior TPDF delegation led by Waitara visited China and met with Defense Minister Cao (who stated China was ready to bring relations with Tanzania to "a new high."<sup>7</sup>)
- In July 2007, a senior TPDF delegation led by L. M. Mwamunyange (chief of staff, TPDF) visited China and met with Zhang Li (deputy chief of the general staff, PLA)
- In September 2008, a senior TPDF delegation led by Lieutenant General Abdulrahman Amir Shimbo (chief of staff, TPDF) visited China and met with Ma Xiaotien (deputy chief of the general staff, PLA)
- In September 2009, Tanzanian Minister of Defense and National Service Hussein Ali Mwinyi visited China and met with Minister of Defense Liang Guanglie and Guo Boxiong (vice chairman, CMC); Guo made special note that "bilateral military ties were an important component of bilateral ties."<sup>8</sup>

It is apparent that a majority of these exchange visits involved Tanzanian officials visiting China. This should come as no surprise, especially given China's international political and economic ascent over the past two decades. Nevertheless, the fact that senior political and military officials repeatedly conferred high honors to Tanzanian officials demon-



**GEOPOLITICS** Tanzania is the largest of the East African countries and its prominent position astride the Western Indian Ocean region gives it strategic importance, as it provides neighboring landlocked countries with critical access to sea lanes of communication, trade and commerce.

strates the strategic priority Tanzania holds within China's Africa policy. And this high status of Tanzania in the Chinese strategic perspective was on display again as another decade passed in the 21st century.

Over a decade after China's first port visit to Tanzania, the PLAN's first hospital ship, *Peace Ark* (AHH 866), set on its maiden voyage that included a five-day stop at Dar es Salaam port in 2010. Commander of the 10,000-ton *Peace Ark* Major General Bao Yuping said "Mission Harmony 2010" was "a trip of service, a trip of harmony and a trip of friendship to reflect the theory of harmonious world and harmonious sea."<sup>9</sup> Beyond this lofty Chinese talk of grandeur, the PLAN vessel offered real humanitarian medical services to Tanzanian military personnel, local citizens and the Chinese community in Tanzania. It also exposed Tanzanian military doctors to Chinese expertise, which served as a recruiting tool for Tanzanians to study medicine in China. Once again, Chinese personnel gained operational experience, but Tanzanians benefited as well.

The following year, Sino-Tanzania military-to-military relations achieved even greater heights. In March 2011, the PLAN's seventh escort flotilla made a five-day port visit to Dar es Salaam. Missile frigates *Zhoushan* (FFG 529) and *Xuzhou* (FFG 530) comprised China's anti-piracy mission operating in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast. Three months later, General Davis Mwamunyange, chief of the TPDF, visited Beijing. He met both Chen Bingde, chief of the General





**FOREIGN AID** In addition to support of the military, China has also funded other strategic projects in Tanzania such as the TAZARA Railway which linked the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam (left) with the town of Kapiri Mposhi in Zambia's copper belt (right) in order to provide landlocked Zambia with an alternative route for its copper exports. TAZARA was a turnkey project financed and executed by the People's Republic of China, costing about \$500 million, making it the largest single foreign-aid project undertaken by China at the time. Although it remains in operation, TAZARA is now in a state of near-collapse due to mismanagement, financial difficulties and inadequate maintenance. *Wiki Creative Commons photos*

Staff, PLA, as well as state councilor and Minister of Defense Liang Guanglie. Notably, Liang “hailed Tanzania’s support to China on Taiwan and Tibet-related issues as well as other major issues concerning China’s core and critical interests.”<sup>10</sup> What these exchange visits demonstrated was China’s long-term commitment to developing strategic relations with Tanzania. The largely balanced, reciprocal nature of the military exchange visits revealed the symbolic and substantive relations between the two countries. Furthermore, the repeated expressions of shared strategic interests and values solidified the relationship in the 21st century.

## Goods and Influence

In addition to high-level military interactions and PLAN port visits, in the 21st century China has continued to provide significant amounts of tangible military assistance to Africa, from small-arms and officer training to aircraft and infrastructure development. This also is not new to the Sino-Tanzanian relationship. China has provided military assistance to Tanzania since diplomatic relations were formally established in 1964, but the continued assistance is a meaningful reminder of China’s long-term commitment.<sup>11</sup> For example, between 2000 and 2012, China provided approximately \$63 million in arms exports to Tanzania.<sup>12</sup> This accounted for nearly three-quarters of all reported foreign-arms exports to the country. During the aforementioned PLAN Rear Admiral Jiang’s visit to Tanzania in 2000, General Mboma revealed that Tanzania expected cooperation to be enhanced in military personnel training and equipment upgrades.<sup>13</sup> So the recurrent Chinese military assistance to Tanzania has not been a real surprise. What is interesting to consider, however, is the long-term cumulative effects of Chinese military assistance to Tanzania.

Though it has long been a provider of military goods abroad, China’s tangible support of Tanzania’s military capabilities sometimes has not been immediately apparent. In 2005, for example, arms manufacturer Mzinga Corporation within Tanzania’s Ministry of Defense and National Service reportedly achieved an annual production capacity of 7 million rounds of 7.62-ammunition for AK-47 rifles. Mzinga, as

it turns out, had been using Chinese production equipment supplied in 1971-1972.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent efforts to enhance Mzinga’s production output using Belgian equipment came to naught, as Belgian government officials refused to authorize the license for an equipment transfer. One wonders, to whom will the Mzinga turn to next?<sup>15</sup>

Across the TPDF order of battle, Chinese arms and equipment and, therefore, Chinese training and doctrine are all readily apparent. As with nearly all African militaries, it must be remembered that ground forces comprise the bulk of the armed forces, while air and naval forces may be considered appendages. For example, the TPDF comprises a total strength of approximately 25,500; 21,000 are Army; 3,500, Air Force; and 1,050, Navy.<sup>16</sup> An overwhelming amount of Tanzania Army’s armor and artillery are Chinese-made. More significantly, perhaps, is the Army’s synthesis of British, Chinese and African guerrilla doctrine. While the Army has come under greater Western influence in the post-Cold War environment, legacy doctrine and training continue to inform Tanzania’s Army even as it continues to study Western doctrine.

China and Tanzania reportedly signed a military-cooperation agreement around 2007. Since then, China has continued to be a key partner in the training and equipping of Tanzania’s Air Force, particularly with the Chinese-manufactured K-8 jet trainer.<sup>17</sup> The Air Force is also thought to be organized along Chinese regimental lines and its principal capability is a moderate transport one, again using Chinese-made transport aircraft. On the water, half of Tanzania Navy’s patrol and coastal craft are of Chinese origin. Again, most of the transfers occurred in the 20th century. Nevertheless, continued use of Chinese military goods provides China with a convenient opportunity to continue to develop strategic relations. Indeed, China’s presence in Tanzania — and around Africa — provides it with strategic opportunities, especially given the free or preferential transfer arrangements offered by China. It has been noted, moreover, that China is “particularly well placed to redevelop Africa’s crumbling military infrastructure,” from barracks to airstrips.<sup>18</sup> The political implications of Chinese-man-

ufactured arms sales to Tanzania — and Chinese military assistance in general — may outweigh the weapons themselves.

A case in point is China's alleged use of covert forms of military assistance, which allegedly involved shipments through Tanzania to Burundi. According to Human Rights Watch, China in the past delivered covert shipments of weapons labeled as agricultural equipment to Dar es Salaam; in contravention to a number of arms embargoes, arms were destined for warring factions during Burundi's civil war in 1995-1996.<sup>19</sup> While it is difficult to verify the veracity of this report, which was based on firsthand accounts, what is clear is that this case of purported Chinese covert arms shipments was misreported and misidentified by more recent observers and scholars of China in Africa, all of whom attribute these alleged Chinese activities to the 21st century when, in fact, the allegations occurred in the previous decade.<sup>20</sup> This example serves as a reminder that China's presence in Africa, while certainly cause for close examination, requires careful strategic assessment, particularly in light of its presence on the continent since the 1950s.

## Assessment and Lessons

Thus, it may be true that China's relationship with Tanzania facilitates its "search for secure access to energy and commodities," as 21st century commentators and analysts are wont to point out.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, as this article has elucidated, Tanzania — indeed, Africa as a whole — is much more than a land of strategic resources for China. Africa, rather, is a land of strategic *opportunity* for China. This explains China's commitment to Tanzania. Through careful and deliberate actions, China has forged close, strategic ties with Tanzania into the 21st century. Today, both nations constantly draw on the historical aspects of the relationship as well as the successful examples of mutual benefit and cooperation, both real and perceived. Tanzania has become a key strategic ally of China in East Africa, which was accomplished through long-term planning as well as presence and awareness of the local environment. U.S. Africa policy would do well to learn from these characteristics of China's Africa policy, particularly if the United States has interests in forming long-term partnerships on the continent.

In order to invest in the long haul, the United States must send personnel to Africa, not necessarily to represent American interests officially, but rather to develop relationships, meaningful and lasting ones. The 21st century Sino-Tanzanian strategic relationship analyzed here is, above all, a shared relationship, with both nation-states and peoples interested in the long-term well-being of the relationship. The American tendency for "political missionary behavior" (that is, brief and sporadic stints of engagement in foreign countries, then rapid withdrawals and forgotten relationships) will no longer suffice, if it ever did, in the 21st century.<sup>22</sup> Americans must demonstrate both symbolic and substantive commitment to nations and peoples in Africa. This is only possible when foreign languages, cultures and histories are appreciated and known; then relationships may be properly nurtured. Advanced information and communications technologies may assist in America's long-term endeavors, but nothing — *nothing* — can replace the individual on the ground, on the streets, and, in the case of Africa, in the bush, among the people. **SW**

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## Notes

1. Mwalimu is Swahili for "teacher."
2. "Chinese Envoy Praises Tanzania's Nyerere," *Xinhua*, October 14, 1999. In total, Nyerere visited China thirteen times, five as president.
3. "Spokeswoman Says PRC Mourns Passing of Nyerere," *Xinhua*, October 19, 1999.
4. For background on the geopolitical importance of Kenya, see Donovan C. Chau, *Global Security Watch: Kenya* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).
5. "Chinese Naval Ships' Head Meets Tanzanian Army Chief," *Xinhua*, July 28, 2000.
6. The following was compiled from *Xinhua* and *Jiefanjun Bao* articles between 2000 and 2012.
7. "China, Tanzania to Enhance Military Ties," *Xinhua*, September 28, 2005.
8. "Chinese, Tanzanian Armed Forces Vow to Deepen Substantial Cooperation," *Xinhua*, September 24, 2009.
9. Guo Chunju, "'It's a Pleasure to Exchange Medical Experiences with Chinese Navy Doctors,'" *Xinhua*, October 20, 2010.
10. "Chinese Defense Minister Vows to Promote Military Ties with Tanzania to New Height," *Xinhua*, July 15, 2011.
11. For an historical examination of Chinese security assistance to Tanzania, see Donovan C. Chau, "East to East: PRC Security Assistance to Tanzania, 1964-1976," in *Security Assistance: U.S. and International Historical Perspectives*, Kendall D. Gott, ed. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 271-289.
12. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "TIV (Trend Indicator Value) of Arms Exports to Tanzania, 1961-2001," May 18, 2012, <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background>. U.S. dollar figure is expressed in 1990 constant amount.
13. "Chinese Naval Ships' Head Meets Tanzanian Army Chief."
14. Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman and Luce Béraud-Sudreau, *Arms Flows to Sub-Saharan Africa*, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 3 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2011), 10.
15. Ibid.
16. "Armed Forces, Tanzania," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Central Africa*, May 12, 2011.
17. Lauren Gelfand, "China Uses African Visit to Promote Military Sales," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 27, 2010.
18. "China's Latest African Gambit," *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, November 21, 2006. Though the precise figures are unclear, China's weapons sales to countries in Africa like Tanzania generate jobs in China. Stratfor, "China: Engagement for Africa," June 23, 2006, <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/china-engagement-africa>.
19. "Stoking Fires with Arms in Burundi," *Relief and Rehabilitation Network Newsletter*, no. 11 (May 1998): 19. This newsletter is produced by the UK Overseas Development Institute. Published in 1998, the Human Rights Watch report was entitled *Stoking the Fires: Military Assistance and Arms Trafficking in Burundi*.
20. For an example from well-regarded Africa scholar, see J. Peter Pham, "Hu's Selling Guns to Africa," *World Defense Review*, June 7, 2007, <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham062807.shtml>.
21. Matthew Smith, "Analysis: China in Africa," *Jane's Defence Industry*, June 8, 2008.
22. Colin S. Gray, After Iraq: *The Search for a Sustainable National Security Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, January 2009), ix.